

The Things They Carried Criteria for “How To Tell A True War Story”

MORALITY

“A true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue... If a story seems moral, do not believe it” (76m).

“You can tell a true war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil” (76b).

“You can tell a true war story if it embarrasses you” (77t).

“And in the end, of course, a true war story is never about war” (91).

TRUTH

“In any war story, but especially a true one, it’s difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen. ... The angles of vision of skewed” (78).

“...there is always that surreal seemingness, which makes the story seem untrue, but which in fact represents the hard and exact truth as it *seemed*” (78b).

“In many cases a true war story cannot be believed. If you believe it, be skeptical” (79t).

“Often, the crazy stuff is true and the normal stuff isn’t” (79t).

“In a war you lose your sense of the definite, ..., in a true war story nothing is ever absolutely true” (88).

“Somebody tells a story, let’s say, and afterward, you ask, ‘Is it true?’ and if the answer matters, you’ve got your answer” (89).

“Absolute occurrence is irrelevant. A thing may happen and be a total lie; another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth” (89b).

“Of I could somehow recreate the fatal whiteness of that light, the quick glare, the obvious causes and effect, then you would believe the last thing Curt Lemon believed, which for him must’ve been the final truth” (90).

EMOTIONS AND FEELING

“It comes down to gut instinct. A true war story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe” (84b).

ENDING / BEGINNING / CIRCULARITY

“You can tell a true war story by the way it never seems to end. Not then, not ever” (83).

“In a true war story, if there’s a moral at all, it’s like the thread that makes the cloth. You can’t tease it out. ... And in the end, really, there’s nothing much to say about a true war story, except maybe ‘Oh’” (84m).

CONTRADICTIONS

“The truths are contradictory. It can be argued, for instance, that war is grotesque. But in truth war is also beauty. ... and a true war story will tell the truth about this, though the truth is ugly” (87).

“Though it’s odd, you’re never more alive than when you’re almost dead” (88t).

“There is no clarity. Right spills over into wrong. Order blends into chaos., love into hate, ugliness into beauty, law into anarchy, civility into savagery” (88m).

Consider ‘the buffalo story’. How does it fit with the criteria of a true war story?

The purposes of telling a true war story:

- convince oneself of the truth
- remembrance
- preserve a legacy
- raise questions and curiosity
- engage the reader in the emotions, not the event
- tell the truth with a lack of censorship
- embarrass both the speaker and the reader

Choices made to create a true war story:

- omission
- changing perspectives
- multiple points of view
- addition
- exaggeration